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Lucia A Keegan 08/28/2006 10:36:17 AM From DB/Inbox: Lucia A Keegan

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Lebanon - France's Commitment
PARIS - Friday, August 25, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Lebanon - France's Commitment

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

President Chirac's televised message last evening and his announcement that France will be sending an additional 1600 soldiers to Lebanon are today's lead international stories and the front page story in Le Figaro. The paper analyzes the "dilly-dallying of French Diplomacy" and the tug of war between the Europeans about the command of the UNIFIL. In his editorial in Le Figaro Pierre Rousselin acknowledges that "the path in Lebanon is narrow: between guilty inaction and excessive risk-taking, the war could spark up again." (See Part C) Le Figaro carries an interview with MOD Alliot-Marie, introduced on the front page: "A Risky Mission." The title of the interview quotes her affirming: "France Has the Means to Act Like a Major Power." "France is taking on a risky mission;

this is why the conditions for its implementation cannot remain unclear... Those who have been criticizing France are quick to do so; and meanwhile they are not sending any troops... We are not overstretched, and we can afford to send troops in addition to Afghanistan, Bosnia and the Ivory Coast..." This morning FM Douste-Blazy recalled on Radio RTL that France had been "the first country to send soldiers to Lebanon". He also said that "Iran has a great role to play in the region and that the international community must talk with to the Iranians." Like Chirac yesterday, he called for European involvement in the UNIFIL, saying that "France cannot be the only country present in Lebanon."

Le Parisien interviews Antoine Sfeir, a political analyst of Lebanese extraction: "Syria is extremely isolated, including within the Arab world. It is in dire need of oxygen and I believe France must make a gesture. France is the only country which can talk with everyone. Talking does not mean agreeing..."

Former French Foreign Affairs Minister Herve de Charette pens an op-ed in Le Monde in which he emphasizes that "the time has come for negotiations with all of the Middle Eastern states." De Charette says that the current instability in the Middle East is the fault of a series of factors. The first is the American plan for the Greater Middle East... the second is the Israeli renouncement to negotiate peace with the Palestinians, and finally the intransigence of the leaders of Hamas and Hizbullah.

La Croix's Question of the Day asks Colette Avital, Labor member of the Knesset, "Was the War in Lebanon Legitimate?" Avital responds in the affirmative, citing "Hezbollah aggression... that took place within our internationally recognized borders." Avital further dismisses Europe's qualification of the offensive as disproportionate: "Two hundred fifty missiles per day that fall on Israel are disproportionate." There is "neither victor nor vanquished" after this campaign, says Avital, but there are "opportunities for political solutions."

In a report on the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon, FR3 commented that UNIFIL "does not have the order to disarm Hezbollah" and showed a Hezbollah minister saying his party "will never surrender and lay down its arms." FR3 also quoted Nayla Moawad, the only woman in the Lebanese government and "the only one who dares to criticize Hezbollah," according to FR3, which added that she is now afraid to leave her home.

Liberation devotes its lead story to Segolene Royal, and asks: "Can They Stop Her?" in reference to the other five Socialist Party hopefuls (Hollande, Jospin, Lang, Fabius and Strauss-Kahn) for the 2007 Presidential election. The editorial is entitled "The Hounds."

La Croix devotes its lead to "France's New Converts to Islam." In his editorial Michel Kubler wonders if "the high number of conversions in France might be a sign that finally Islam is becoming French."

Le Figaro's front page notes worrisome signs that the U.S. economy is heading for a recession. The economic papers devote their lead to the latest "mega merger in Italy's banking world" between Banca Intesa and Sanpaolo-IMI. France's Le Credit Agricole, a shareholder in Banca Intesa, "supports the merger" says La Tribune, raising the new group to number 7 in Europe, according to Les Echos.

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

Lebanon - France's Commitment

"Lebanon: the Narrow Path"

Pierre Rousselin in right-of-center Le Figaro (08/25): "President Bush's troops discovered in Iraq that it was not enough to topple a hated dictator to be loved. Putting soldiers in Lebanon to separate two adversaries who have barely accepted a cease-fire is a perilous endeavor which demands a minimum in terms of precaution... When he made his announcement last evening, President Chirac confirmed that the conditions set by France had been met... But the situation in Lebanon remains complex. The war can start again anytime, with or without the UNIFIL. The path in Lebanon is narrow, between guilty inaction and excessive risk-taking."

"Sharing the Burden"

Philippe Duval in right-of-center Le Parisien (08/25): "President Chirac did away with the ambiguities surrounding Hezbollah's disarmament, forcefully demanded by the Israelis and their American allies, when he said it would take place 'within a Lebanese framework.' In other words it is not the direct mission of the Blue Helmets. But this did not keep President Bush from saluting the French military effort and call for its quick deployment. The American president, bogged down in his war against terrorism, can be relieved. He will not be on the front lines of the Lebanese conflict. France will take his place."

"France Falls in Line"

Marc Semo in left-of-center Liberation (08/25): "Israel's FM Tzipi Livni said Wednesday in Paris that the situation on the ground was 'explosive' and that resolution 1701 needed to be implemented quickly... But France's commitment arrives too late to save it from embarrassment after a week of dilly-dallying... On the ground, the UNIFIL will be able to fire in self-defense and to protect civilians. But its mission is not to seek out Hezbollah's weapons and even less to try to disarm Hezbollah. While UNIFIL is no longer totally powerless, its mission remains highly risky because there is a cessation of hostilities, not a real cease-fire. Hezbollah is ready to fire and Israel will continue with its 'defensive' operations."

"The Dilly-Dallying of French Diplomacy"

Isabelle Lasserre in right-of-center Le Figaro (08/25): "One step forward, two backwards, one more forward, and much ado about nothing. In the end, what is left of France's hesitations? A slightly more tarnished image abroad where the Anglo-Saxon press competes to characterize France as 'amateurish' or 'inconsistent' and points to France's diplomacy as 'inconsequential...' But France was legitimate in asking for a clearer mission... President Chirac's initial ardors were doused by the Military's cautious reticence... Their arguments were legitimate: a resolution which lacked details; a confusing situation on the ground and complicated relations between France, Iran and Syria... France's hesitations were largely eliminated last evening by Chirac. But will it be enough to revamp France's reputation when it comes to diplomacy? After having preached so much in favor of multilateralism, its hesitations have led some to say that 'the damage is done.' In the Middle East, France's detractors say its hesitations have endangered the fragile cease-fire. Finally, what will be the impact on transatlantic relations, which have already been harmed by the conflict in Iraq? France had no choice but to revise its stance in the face of the criticism that followed its retreat. But, caught between Hezbollah, whose disarmament appears improbable, and the Israeli army, which will not allow incursions from the Shia militia, it is doubtful whether this force's job will be one of peacekeeping." ROSENBLATT